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José Cortés de Alcocer

Don José García de León y Pizarro offers the Kingdom of Quito to Charles III, 1784

JOSÉ CORTÉS DE ALCOCER
(Quito, documented 1762–1803)

DON JOSÉ GARCÍA DE LEÓN Y PIZARRO OFFERS THE KINGDOM OF QUITO TO CHARLES III, 1784

Inscribed lower centre: 'Altior assurgit, tanto spectatior Orbi. / Non ut despicias, sed mihi prospicias.'

Inscribed on the reverse: 'Al Ill.mo S.or D.n José Garcia de Leon / y Pizarro (…) / Presidente (…) / y Capitan G.ral de los R.nos (…) / de Quito (…) presenta (…) / (…) y flore(…) / aquellos Reinos (…) / (…) en 178[6]. / Este cuadro es regalo de la / Ciudad de Quito.'

Oil on copper
54 × 45 cm
21 1/4 × 17 3/4 in.

Provenance

Presented by the City of Quito to Don José García de León y Pizarro, 1784–1798;
Thence by descent to his son, Don José García de León y Pizarro y Jiménez de Frías, Paris and Madrid, 1797–1835;
Thence by descent to his son, Don José García de León y Pizarro, Madrid, 1835–1882;
Thence, after the death of his widow, Doña Isabel López y López, in 1908, to his niece, Marie García de León y Pizarro, Baroness de Steenhault de Waerbeeck, Château de Steenhault, Belgium, 1908–1925;
Thence by descent to her son, Léon, Baron de Steenhault de Waerbeeck, Château de Steenhault, Belgium, 1925–1939;
Thence by descent to the present owners.

Comparative literature

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Altior assurgit tanto spe
tatior Orbi.
Non ut despicias. sed mihi
prospicias.

The picture is painted on a single sheet of copper, large for its kind, that has been prepared to give the painter a smooth, close-grained ground on which the paint sits with enamel-like density. Reds are laid in nearly unbroken fields, whites are opaque and cool, and the flesh tones are built up in thin, blended layers that leave no visible brushwork. A crimson canopy fills the upper half, while the dais and its curved steps and cushion occupy the lower half. The whole is enclosed in a carved and gilded frame of asymmetrical rocaille, with a beaded sight edge and a crest carrying a shield of arms beneath a coronet. At the centre of the picture sits Charles III. He wears a full suit of armour beneath an ermine-lined mantle of crimson embroidered in gold, the collar of the Golden Fleece visible at his chest and the blue-and-white sash of his own order, *the Real y Distinguida Orden de Carlos III*, across it; a baton of command in his right hand. The throne is guarded by two lions, and the uprights terminate in crowned orbs, the columns of the Plus Ultra device transposed into furniture. Above, two putti fly holding up the royal arms in their abbreviated form, Castile and León quartered with the pomegranate of *Granada* in base and the *Bourbon* escutcheon of *fleurs-de-lis* at the centre, while a third laurel wreath is held ready over the shield. The king's head and bust are not invented: they follow the official likeness established by Anton Raphael Mengs, in the version in which the monarch wears the sash of his new order rather than that of the *Saint-Esprit* (fig. 1). That the Quito painter reproduced this model is a further confirmation that the successive versions of Mengs's image were, in Juan José Luna's words, "destined to satisfy the demand for commissions from foreign courts and from the governmental centres of the vast Spanish empire."[1] The transmission to Quito may have run through one of the painted replicas that travelled to the viceregal capitals, or through Manuel Salvador Carmona's engraving after the Prado prototype, commissioned in 1782 and completed in 1783, only months before the copper was painted.[2]

Around this fixed centre, three standing figures flank the throne who, like the king, wear the sash of the Order of Charles III together with its breast star, the insignia of the grand cross. The two on the upper step, in dark blue coats with silver-laced red facings and waistcoats, are certainly ministers or high dignitaries of the court. A step below stands a man in a brown suit à la française richly embroidered in gold, identified as José de Gálvez y Gallardo, who after long service to the crown was named *Secretario del Despacho Universal de Indias*, the highest office in the administration of America, by Charles III in 1776.[3] His function in this allegorical composition is to provide the link in the chain that joins the throne in Madrid to the authorities governing the *Audiencia* of Quito, given by the motion of his right hand, which extends open toward the kneeling President. The grand cross he wears had been conferred on him

[1] Juan José Luna, *El Prado en el Ermitage* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2011), 168–169. On the diffusion of the type see also Ludmila L. Kagané, "Los retratos de Car-los III y de los príncipes de Asturias de Mariano Salvador Maella existentes en el Palacio Chesmensky," *Archivo de Arte Valenciano 88* (2007): 37–44.

[2] Museo Nacional del Prado, Anton Raphael Mengs, Carlos III, c. 1761, oil on canvas, 154 × 110 cm, P002200; and the replica with the insignia of the new order, Carlos III, c. 1774, oil on canvas, 154 × 105.5 cm, P005011, online catalogue entries. The Prado also holds Manuel Salvador Carmona's engraving after P002200, commissioned by the Secretaría de Estado in 1782 and completed in 1783 (G002990).

[3] On Gálvez see Manuel Olmedo Checa, "Vindicación de José de Gálvez en su tricentena-rio," *Péndulo. Revista de Ingeniería y Humanidades* 31 (2020): 120–146.

in 1783, a year before the picture was painted. He can be seen in a canvas attributed to Joaquín Inza in the *Diputación de Málaga* also carrying a tricorne under his arm (fig. 2). On the left, a group of seven men answers the group of three on the right. At its head, and nearest the throne, kneels the man to whom this picture is dedicated: Don José García de León y Pizarro, Regent and President of the *Real Audiencia de Quito* from 1778 to 1784. He kneels on the lowest step in an act of submission to the Crown, his right hand raised in a gesture of offering, his left resting on the baton of command that is the attribute of his office; the sword at his hip completes the dress. He wears a dark blue coat and breeches with scarlet facings and gold embroidery, a scarlet waistcoat and a lace jabot. At the buttonhole of his coat hangs, on its blue-and-white ribbon, the small, enamelled cross of the Order of Charles III, the badge of a knight rather than the star of a grand cross. The king had granted him the distinction on 23 April 1780, though the proofs of nobility required for its final award were not completed until 10 June 1782, and he was admitted as a supernumerary knight.[4] This was precisely the dress that court etiquette prescribed for a man of rank in the Spain of Charles III and was produced at near uniformity across the portraiture of the period. This can be seen in the portrait of another servant of the Crown from the same region and decade, Don Ignacio Flores (1733–1786), the Latacunga-born cavalry officer who put down the rising of Túpac Katari around La Paz in 1781 and went on to preside over the *Real Audiencia de Charcas*, painted in Quito around 1785 (fig. 3). Flores was, moreover, a younger son of the first Marquis of Miraflores and thus the brother of one of the militia colonels who appear in our present picture.[5]

The inscription, although partially lost to abrasion and corrosion, reads: “Al Ill.mo S.or D.n José Garcia de Leon / y Pizarro (...) / Presidente (...) / y Capitan G.ral de los R.nos (...) / de Quito (...) presenta (...) / (...) y flore(...) / aquellos Reinos (...) / (...) en 178[6]. / Este cuadro es regalo de la / Ciudad de Quito.” The reference to an event of 1786 suggests that this text was added in Spain, after García de León’s return from the Indies, but the picture itself must be dated to 1784, when his government in Quito came to an end. His son, the future minister of state of the same name (1770–1835), writes in his memoirs: “On his departure the city presented him with a picture in a magnificent silver frame. On the copper plate he was shown among the portraits of the six military commanders who had assisted him, offering the kingdom of Quito at the foot of the throne.”[6] The support and format are both exceptional in the Real Audiencia de Quito, where painting on metal remained the province of very few workshops and was normally confined to small devotional plates. The silver frame has been lost, and the present carved and gilded frame with its asymmetrical rocaille was made to replace it, probably within a generation.

The memoir invites the question of what these “military commanders” had assisted him in and against what threat. García de León’s term of office (1778–1784) coincided

[4] Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Madrid, Estado-Carlos III, exp. 137, *Expediente de pruebas de caballero de la orden de Carlos III de don José García de León y Pizarro León y Rivera, natural de Motril, Presidente y Regente de la Audiencia de Quito; caballero supernumerario*, 1780–1782.
[5] Rodolfo Pérez Pimentel, *Diccionario Biográfico del Ecuador*, s.v. “Flores de Vergara y Jiménez, Ignacio.”
[6] *Memorias de la vida del Excmo. Señor D. José García de León y Pizarro, escritas por él mismo*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1894–1897), 3:125–126.

exactly with the gravest revolts against Spanish rule in the eighteenth-century Andes: the rebellion of Túpac Amaru II in southern Peru (1780–1781), that of Túpac Katari around La Paz (1781) and the rising of the Comuneros of El Socorro in New Granada (1781). Although none of these directly touched the district of Quito, they were all nevertheless near enough to raise local fears, especially with the memory of the Rebelión de los Barrios of 1765–1766 still burning bright. The President's response was essentially preventive. In 1779, he raised two regiments of militia and a company of artillery in Quito, together with nine independent companies at Quito, Guaranda, Ibarra, Loja and Ambato.[7] As a means of binding the creole elite to his reforms he invited its members to organise these corps, and leading figures of the Quito aristocracy took their command: Manuel Ponce de León Guerrero, Count of Selva Florida, as colonel of the Quito infantry regiment; Joaquín Sánchez de Orellana, son of the Marquis of Villa Orellana, as its lieutenant colonel; and Mariano Flores de Vergara y Jiménez de Cárdenas, Marquis of Miraflores, as colonel of dragoons.[8] These men are almost certainly among the six officers grouped behind the kneeling President. Their dress declares the branch of service to which each belonged, for military uniform had been codified at the beginning of the century: the infantry wore white with coloured facings, here red, while the artillery, the engineers, the household troops and the navy "dressed in dark blue, with red facings and waistcoats as their distinguishing marks."[9] Four of the six accordingly wear the white coat with scarlet lapels and gold frogging of the infantry, and two, the officer at the far left and the one behind him with a gold epaulette, wear the dark blue faced with red that separates them from the foot regiments. The officer at the far left, the only one of the six who turns to face the viewer, is in all probability the Marquis of Miraflores (1731–1810), since both his features and his coat with turned-back lapels correspond closely to a surviving portrait of his father, Don Antonio Flores y Vergara (1687–1764).

At the foot of the dais, seen from behind and turning her face up towards the king, a young woman in a blue bodice and rose-coloured mantle holds a cornucopia heaped with fruit, the symbol of abundance in familiar Baroque vocabulary. She is the personification of the Kingdom of Quito displaying its riches, and performs a second, compositional office as the visual counterweight to the dense block of officers on the other side. Beside her, a cartouche of rococo outline carries the Latin inscription "Altior assurgit, tanto spectatior Orbi. / Non ut despicias, sed mihi prospicias." The first clause states that the higher a man rises, the more conspicuous he becomes to the world; but the second issues a warning: "not so that you may look down on others, but so that you may look out for me." The device, likely composed for the occasion, counsels the governor against arrogance and insists on his responsibility to the people governed, a sentiment characteristic of the enlightened absolutism of the reign. This lineage is recorded on the present frame. Its crest carries a shield quartered in cross: in the first quarter, on gold, a tower beside a bend of three bendlets, for the paternal name García de León; in the second, on gold, a pine tree with two bears rampant against its trunk, the canting arms of Pizarro; in the third, on

[7] Allan J. Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society in New Granada, 1773–1808* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), 90.
[8] Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society in New Granada*, 121.
[9] Vicente Alonso Juanola, "Los uniformes del Museo del Ejército," *Militaria. Revista de cultura militar* 9 (1997): 150.

red, an inescutcheon charged with a radiant sun; and in the fourth, a tree above wavy bars of blue and silver, for Rivera. Three of the four quarters are thus given to the maternal names, Pizarro and Rivera, a distribution that acknowledges the greater standing of the mother's ancestry. The arms correspond directly to those blazoned in the proofs of nobility drawn up for García de León's admission to the Order of Charles III, now in the Archivo Histórico Nacional (figs. 4–5).

This is not the only allegorical picture to record García de León's conduct of the Audiencia. He himself commissioned another, of monumental size, which shows him with his suite, apparently including his own son, visiting the Hospital Real of Quito and distributing food to the sick, and which is signed by José Cortés de Alcocer (fig. 6).[10] Its propagandistic intention is undisguised. The division of the canvas between a celestial and a terrestrial register allows a double reading of the verse that heads the composition, "GLORIA IN ALTISSIMIS DEO ET IN TERRA PAX HOMINIBUS BONAE VOLUNTATIS," in the manner of the Baroque rhetoric then still current in Quito. The canvas identifies the painter as the very one to whom the President had already turned when he wished to leave a public record of his government. The attribution of the present copper to Cortés de Alcocer is further supported by the polished, almost enamelled surface, the saturated and cleanly separated colour, and the choice of copper itself, which together set the picture apart within the production of the Quito school and point at once to the one master of the period known to have cultivated painting on metal.[11]

The small Apotheosis of the Trinity with Dominican and Franciscan Saints in the Museo Jijón y Caamaño of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, also on metal, shares the crisp drawing of the figures and the bright, cool palette (fig. 7). The closest parallel, however, is the series of twelve signed oils on copper belonging to the Archdiocese of Popayán, compositions taken from the engravings of Gottfried Bernhard Göz of the Augsburg school (figs. 8–9). A long-standing tradition holds that these were painted in Popayán in 1786 by the artist's sons Nicolás and Antonio Cortés, detained there in quarantine on their way to Bogotá to join the Botanical Expedition,[12] as is the opinion offered by Santiago Sebastián.[13] The signature on the

[10] Carmen Fernández Salvador, "Hospital Real de la Caridad," in *The Art of Painting in Colonial Quito*, ed. Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2012), 204–205.
[11] For the documentation on the painter see José María Vargas, *El arte ecuatoriano* (Puebla: J. M. Cajica Jr., 1960), 217–218. Cortés de Alcocer is recorded in 1762 as one of the *priostes* of the feast of Saint Luke organised by the Quito guild of painters and sculptors, a sign that he already held the standing of master; in 1786 he was among the artists consulted to form the shortlist of draughtsmen for Mutis's Real Expedición Botánica, to which his sons Antonio and Nicolás were engaged at two pesos and ten rea-les a day respectively, while a third son, Francisco Javier, later directed the drawing academy founded in Lima. Eugenio Espejo, in the Primicias de la Cultura de Quito (1792), ranked Cortés with the sculptor Caspicara as the most distinguished artists of the city, and Francisco José de Caldas still referred to Don José Cortés and his sons as skilled painters in 1803, the year of the Nuestra Señora de Nieva in the parish church of Tulcán inscribed "Josephus Cortés me fecit anno Domini 1803."
[12] Alexandra Kennedy Troya, "La pintura en el Nuevo Reino de Granada," in *Pintura, escultura y artes útiles en Iberoamérica, 1500–1825*, ed. Ramón Gutiérrez (Madrid: Cátedra, 1995), 149–152.
[13] Santiago Sebastián, *Estudios sobre el arte y la arquitectura coloniales en Colombia* (Bogotá: Corporación La Candelaria, 2006), 172.

series, which reads simply “Cortez,” does not settle which member of the family painted them, but the sons can be excluded on grounds of age and artistic maturity alone, since in 1786 both were still very young; the complexity of the cycle and the cost of its materials answer far better to the profile of the father, who by then enjoyed considerable prestige. It is also of interest that the Popayán coppers retain their original silver frames, which give an idea of what the lost frame of the present oval may have looked like.

The size of the copper sheet, the oval format, which is rare in viceregal painting of any school, and the character of the commission, a civic gift that is at once a state allegory, a group portrait of the local military elite and a record of one man’s career, have no close parallel in the painting of the Audiencia. It is the only known allegorical image of a Quito president kneeling before his king, and it closes the group of portraits of the García de León y Pizarro family in this catalogue by moving the same man from the private register of the household portrait to the public one of government.



Fig. 1: Anton Raphael Mengs, *Charles III*, ca. 1761, oil on canvas, 154 × 110 cm (60 5/8 × 43 ¼ in.), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, P002200 (detail), the replica with the sash of the Order of Charles III is P005011, ca. 1774



Fig. 2: Attributed to Joaquín Inza, *Portrait of Don José de Gálvez y Gallardo*, ca. 1783, oil on canvas, 85 × 60 cm (33 1/2 × 23 5/8 in.), Diputación de Málaga.



Fig. 3: Anonymous Quito painter, *Portrait of Don Ignacio Flores y Jiménez*, ca. 1785, oil on canvas, 84 × 99 cm (33 1/8 × 38 in.), private collection, Quito



Fig. 4: Paternal arms of Don José García de León y Pizarro, from his proofs of nobility for the Order of Charles III, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Estado-Carlos III, exp. 137



Fig. 5: Maternal arms of Don José García de León y Pizarro, from his proofs of nobility for the Order of Charles III. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Estado-Carlos III, exp. 137



Fig. 6: José Cortés de Alcocer, *Visit of Don José García de León y Pizarro to the Hospital of San Juan de Dios, Quito*, 1777–1784, oil on canvas, 345 × 327 cm (135 7/8 × 128 3⁄4 in.), Hospital Eugenio Espejo, Quito



Fig. 7: Attributed to José Cortés de Alcocer, *Apotheosis of the Trinity with Dominican and Franciscan Saints*, 1780–1790, oil on metal, 34 × 24 cm (13 3/8 × 9 1/2 in.), Museo Jijón y Caamaño, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, Quito



Fig. 8: José Cortés de Alcocer, *The Four Parts of the World Adoring the Virgin*, ca. 1786, oil on copper, 31 × 21.5 cm (12 1/4 × 8 1/2 in.), Museo Arquidiocesano de Arte Religioso, Popayán



Fig. 9: José Cortés de Alcocer, *Immaculate Conception*, ca. 1786, oil on copper, 31 × 21.5 cm (12 1/4 × 8 1/2 in.), Museo Arquidiocesano de Arte Religioso, Popayán

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